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ABSTRACT

Commercial television as it currently exists presents moral content and values that are often contrary to the predominant values of the society. It emphasizes violence and illegal action; it perpetuates a system in which groups of people are devalued because of sex, race, age, and other such criteria. There is good reason to believe that this type of television content affects children's moral behavior. It frequently leads to increased aggression; there is also reason to believe that it results in lowered self-control and greater likelihood of morally deviant behaviors. Nevertheless, television as it exists now is a large commercial enterprise that is not likely to change even with the extensive evidence that violence may be harming children. It might change if alternatives were presented to it. There is good reason to believe that many positive moral values and behaviors can be conveyed to children through television presentations. If such presentations draw audiences, they provide some alternative for commercial television producers. What we as researchers can do is to identify the components that help to make a program effective both in attracting children's interest and in producing some positive effects on their behavior. (Author)

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Aletha Huston Stein

The effects of mass media, primarily television, on the moral development and values of young children are a major social concern. These terms are defined rather broadly in this paper to provide a useful framework for evaluating the potential effects of the mass media. Values are defined as the types of behavior that are considered good or bad and the types of people who are considered good or important. Moral development is conceptualized as having two components. One component is moral judgment or the processes by which children make decisions about the rightness or wrongness of actions. Most of the research on moral judgment is based on Piaget's or Kohlberg's conceptions of stages of moral judgment based partly on the overall cognitive development of the child.

The second component and the one with which this paper is concerned is moral behavior. For a long time, the study of children's moral behavior was heavily influenced by psychoanalytic theory and its derivatives in social learning theory. Partly for that reason, the focus was primarily on guilt, resistance to temptation, responses to deviation from moral rules and other behaviors that were thought to indicate "conscience." That is, morality was defined rather narrowly as the ability to inhibit impulses and to experience guilt if you failed to inhibit some forbidden behavior. In recent years, the concern of many developmental researchers has shifted to more positive forms of behavior such as helping, sharing, altruistic acts, expressing sympathy, and other forms of social interaction that are generally considered prosocial. The term "positive" is used not as a value judgment so much as an indicator that morality often involves taking action, not just inhibiting action. There are sins of omission as well as commission. Even the process of inhibiting impulsive action can be conceptualized better as self-regulation that involves knowing when to inhibit and when to express impulses rather than sheer suppression of forbidden actions.

Using these rather broad criteria for defining values and moral development, three major issues are examined. First, the types of values and moral examples that are prevalent in current commercial television fare are discussed. Second the apparent effects of that type of television content on children's values and moral behavior are examined. The final section examines the potential of television for conveying very different moral messages than it currently contains with some of the literature showing the types of moral behavior that can be taught to young children through the media.

Content of commercial television.

Geroge Gerbner and his colleagues (Lange, Baker, & Ball, 1969; Gerbner, 1972), have conducted the most extensive content analyses of commercial television programs that are available. I will rely primarily on their findings to describe the values apparent in television fiction. They analyzed an entire week of programs on the three major networks during prime time and Saturday mornings from 1967 to 1969. These analyses were directed toward identifying the role of violence in television content, so the values conveyed are related in some way to violence.

Violence and direct power assertion are portrayed as legitimate and valuable ways of dealing with conflict or reaching a goal. Violence is used as frequently by the "good guys" as by the "bad guys". It results in positive outcomes almost as often as it results in negative outcomes. Perhaps more disturbing is the fact that criminal, illegal, and socially-disapproved activities are also frequently presented as justified and successful modes of action. In some content analyses by Larsen, Cray, and Fortis (1968), socially-disapproved methods of goal-attainment, including violence, were more likely to be successful than socially-approved methods. In an early analysis, Himmelweit, Oppenheim and Vince (1958) found that good behavior alone rarely achieved success.

The values being conveyed then, are that "violence is a legitimate and successful means of attaining a desired end" (Lange, Baker, & Ball, 1969, p. 335) and that violations of law or social norms are also frequently justified. It is worth noting that sexual behavior, even in the context of marriage, is almost always followed by negative consequences on television.

Perhaps more pervasive are the values concerning what types of people are important, good, or powerful. Gerbner (1972) argues that physical violence in fictional television programs is symbolic of more general power-assertion in real life. That is, the types of characters who use violence successfully are portraying the types of people who are successful in the society. To the extent that there are specific groups who are portrayed as successful or unsuccessful, television is conveying and perpetuating different social stereotypes.

In brief, the message that seems to be conveyed is that white, American, middle-class, young and middle-aged males are the most important, most powerful, and most successful group of people. Individuals who do not fit one or more of those categories are less important and are less likely to succeed. I base these generalizations on two types of measures from Gerbner's studies: 1) the frequency of appearance of different groups as leading characters, 2) the frequency with which different groups engage in violence contrasted with the frequency with which they are victims of violence. That is, if you examine how often women, for example, engage in violence in relation to how often they are victims of violence, you have some index of how successful and powerful they are supposed to be. High rates of being on the receiving end of violence suggests a relatively low status for a given group.

The mere frequency of leading characters conveys some messages to children about who the interesting and important people in the world are. Approximately 3/4 of the leading characters are male. In cartoons, about 90% of the leading

characters are male; very few are not identifiable by sex. Further, women are cast in limited roles, usually involving romantic or family themes. Most of their roles involve some suggestion of sex (Gerbner, 1972, p. 45). Men are shown in much more diverse roles than women. When women are cast in roles other than romance and family, they usually die or fail in some way.

Other groups who are given low status by infrequent representation include children, adolescents, old people and people of lower social class. About 90% of the leading characters are young or middle-aged adults and the great majority are either middle class or their social class is unidentifiable. There is a small representation of upper classes (about 20%) and virtually no explicit representation of lower classes (about 4%), (DeFleur, 1964; Gerbner, 1972). Females, non-whites, and foreigners are relatively more likely to be victims of violence than their white male American counterparts. While females engage in violence much less often than males, the rate with which they are the victims of violence exceeds their rate of behaving violently. For males, this is not the case. Non-whites and foreigners are portrayed as behaving very violently, but they are even more often the victims of violence. Two messages seem to be conveyed by this pattern. On the one hand, non-whites and foreigners are dangerous and violent. On the other hand, they are likely to fail and really have little power.

The discussion so far has focused on violence and the values of the society symbolized in violent television portrayals. Unfortunately, there are not to my knowledge such detailed content analyses of other aspects of television programs. It appears that many values about family living and human relationships are conveyed in situation comedies and the like, but these have yet to be explored in depth.

In summary, the predominant values conveyed in commercial television fare are that aggression and illegal activity are frequently successful and morally justified. A good end justifies almost any means. Children are likely to view

the consequences of an action as an important indicator of its moral "rightness" or "wrongness", so the successful consequences of violence are especially important in this context. Current television fare also conveys differential value and importance for various groups of people. Females, the very young and the very old, lower classes, non-whites, and foreigners are presented as relatively unimportant and powerless.

Effects of current television on moral behavior.

There has been a recent flurry of research and concern about the effects of television on children's behavior, but again, most of it has been concerned with the effects of violence on aggressive behavior. Aggression can certainly be considered under the rubric, "moral behavior" or immoral behavior, but there are other forms of behavior that are affected by violent programs.

In a study that Lynette Friedrich and I did a couple of years ago, we attempted to explore the effects of aggressive television programming on a wide range of children's behavior (Stein & Friedrich, 1972). The study was experimental, but it was conducted in a natural setting--a nursery school. We divided 93 preschool children into three television viewing groups. One group watched a series of "Batman" and "Superman" cartoons; a second group watched a series of "Misterogers' Neighborhood" programs; the third watched "neutral films." Thus, we had a group exposed to aggressive cartoons, one exposed to prosocial programs, and a neutral control group. The neutral films were selected to have little or no aggressive or prosocial content. They included nature films, visits to the post office, and so on. We observed the children for a three-week baseline period before they began watching the programs. Then each group saw twelve programs spread out over the next four weeks and were observed in free play. Finally, we observed them during a two week post-viewing period.

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The prosocial programming will be discussed later, but the effects of the aggressive programs are most pertinent at this point. In particular, I want to point out their effects on behaviors other than aggression.

Three of the behavior categories used in observing the children were grouped conceptually as "self-regulation." One of these categories was "rule obedience." It included any behavior that conformed to the nursery school rules when there was a clear choice and when it was performed in the absence of adult supervision. Things like picking up toys and putting them away without being told were scored as rule obedience. When we compared the changes in rule obedience from the baseline period to the television viewing period for the children in the three viewing conditions, we found that those who had watched the aggressive programs dropped in their level of rule obedience, and those who had watched prosocial programs had increased. The neutral group fell in between. There was some tendency, then, for children who viewed aggressive programs to become less "rule obedient" than the other groups.

The second behavior category classified under self-regulation was tolerance of delay. This category reflected patient waiting by the child when he could not do something he wanted to do right away. It was scored when children waited for help they had requested from the teacher if she were busy. It might also involve waiting for a piece of equipment that was being used by another child. The differences among television viewing groups on tolerance of delay were very marked. Children who saw the aggressive programs showed a marked drop in tolerance of delay, and children in the other two conditions increased. There was a clear and significant difference between those viewing Batman and Superman and those viewing neutral or prosocial programs. We feel safe in concluding that the aggressive programs led to a reduction in tolerance of delay.

In this study, we also observed cooperation, sharing, and other forms of

positive interpersonal behavior. Aggressive television did not affect these behaviors, but another experimental study found reduced sharing after children viewed aggressive cartoons (Hapkiewitz & Roden, 1971). In that study, children were shown aggressive cartoons, non-aggressive cartoons, or no cartoons. Then pairs of children were observed playing with a toy that had a peephole through which a movie could be seen. Only one child at a time could see through the hole. Both aggressive behavior and sharing the toy were scored. While there were no differences in aggressive behavior as a function of television viewing, the children who had seen the aggressive cartoons shared less than the other groups.

All of these findings suggest that aggressive television programs, particularly cartoons, may have adverse affects on some aspects of self-regulation and positive social interactions. As there are so few investigations exploring behaviors other than aggression, these results must be treated as suggestive rather than as conclusive.

Aggressive behavior. I have deliberately given attention to behavior other than aggression, but I will summarize briefly the findings concerning aggressive behavior as well. In the Stein & Friedrich (1972) study, we observed physical and verbal aggression in the classroom. For the analysis, we divided the children into those who were above and below the median during the baseline period. For those above the median in the baseline period, there were significant differences in aggressive behavior change among the three television viewing groups. Children who watched the aggressive programs were more aggressive than those who saw the neutral programs. The group viewing the prosocial programs was close to the neutral group. For children who were below the median during the baseline period, there were no effects of the television programs. It appeared, therefore, that the children who were initially above average in aggression were stimulated to

show aggressive behavior when they watched violent cartoons. There is a vast array of data from other studies supporting the conclusion that aggressive behavior is likely to increase as a result of watching violent television (see Liebert, 1972).

In summary, there is extensive evidence that violent television programs lead to increased aggressive behavior for many children in many settings. There is some evidence that they also result in reduced tolerance for minor frustrations, obedience of rules, and sharing. What about the more directly "moral" content of television programs? There is extensive crime and other forms of illegal and immoral behavior in television programming. What effect does that have on behavior? To answer this question, we must turn to the experimental literature on imitation because there are no systematic studies in a more naturalistic context. One hears occasional anecdotes of a person reporting that he got the idea for his crime from a television program, but there are obvious difficulties in doing research in this area.

In experimental studies, children do imitate models who engage in mild deviations from rules or moral values (see Hoffman, 1970). There are many reasons, however, why these results might not apply to real television programs. One reason that is frequently cited is that crime and immorality are usually punished in television drama. Therefore, the message that is being taught is that crime does not pay. As we have seen earlier, it is not always the case that illegal activity is punished. Even if it were punished consistently, the experimental literature suggests that children would learn about such immoral behavior and, in some instances, would imitate it.

A number of studies have been conducted in which children have observed models engaging in some deviant act and being punished for it. Children observing such models have been compared with those who saw models behaving deviantly and

being rewarded, or receiving no consequences and with children who have not seen any models. In most of these studies, though not all, children who have seen the punished model show less deviant behavior themselves than those who have seen the model not punished. Seeing the model punished typically results in levels of deviation that are similar to the no model control groups (see Hoffman, 1970). In these experimental studies, then, one can conclude that seeing a deviant model who is punished leads to little alteration in behavior -- it neither promotes nor inhibits deviant behavior.

There is real question about whether this conclusion can be generalized to television programming. In real television programs, there are a number of conditions that make it more difficult to connect actions with consequences than it is in a short film made for an experimental study. There is often a great deal of time between the act and its consequences and the consequences are often less clear and less salient because they are embedded in a complex story line. In one piece of recent research, Leifer and Roberts (1972) examined the effects of positive and negative consequences in real television programs on children's behavior. They studied the effects of positive and negative consequences for aggressive behavior on children's aggressive responding. As in the case of morally deviant behavior, experimental studies have shown that children imitate aggression less when the model is punished than when he experiences no consequences or reward. Nevertheless, Leifer and Roberts found that consequences portrayed on television did not differentially affect children's aggressive responding. Their subjects responded to television violence with increased aggression regardless of whether the violent behavior was rewarded or punished. Thus, they found that the phenomenon that works very nicely in the relatively uncontaminated conditions of the laboratory did not hold up for real television programs. Although this study dealt with aggression, it suggests that showing morally deviant behavior on television may lead to imitation even when it is punished.

The effects of current television fare on children's moral behavior may be summarized as follows. Violent programming may reduce self-regulation or self-control and some types of prosocial interpersonal behavior. The evidence is fairly clear that such programs lead to increased interpersonal aggression in a wide variety of settings. The effects of presenting crime, illegal actions. and other morally deviant behavior on television have received less attention than aggression. In experimental studies of imitation, children do imitate minor deviations from rules. In those instances, if they observe punishment to a model who deviates, they do not show increases in deviant behavior. The punishment to the model apparently counteracts the instigation to deviant behavior provided by the model's example. This conclusion cannot be generalized safely to real television programs at this time, however. The consequences portrayed in these programs do not appear to have as much impact as those used in experimental studies, so there may in fact be increased deviant behavior as a result of such acts on television despite the fact that they are punished in the end.

Potential of television for positive effects on children's moral development.

The picture presented thus far is a dismal one. Many of the values and moral lessons presented in commercial television are in conflict with socially accepted practices. There is a possibility, however, for television to serve more positive ends by presenting a different set of values. There is a small amount of evidence on real television programs that attempt to promote prosocial values, and the experimental literature on imitation suggests some of the effects that television could have with proper programming.

Prosocial programming with an emphasis on moral behavior as it was defined earlier is very rare, even with the growth of several new children's programs that are doing other admirable things. In our own research, we selected the Misterogers Neighborhood program because it emphasizes prosocial and moral behavior rather than cognitive skills. In the experimental study that was described earlier

(Stein & Friedrich, 1972), both self-regulation and interpersonal behavior were affected by viewing the Misteroger's program. The effects on some aspects of self-regulation were more clear-cut and more durable than the effects on interpersonal behavior. Two indexes of self-regulation were discussed earlier: rule obedience and tolerance of delay. The third behavior that was categorized as self-regulation was task persistence in tasks that he or she selected in free play. Children who saw Misterogers increased in task persistence, while those in the neutral and aggressive television groups decreased in persistence. There were trends for greater rule obedience following the Misterogers program, but no effects on delay tolerance. In these three categories of self-regulation, then, we found some positive effects of a program that very gently emphasizes themes relating to practicing to do things well, learning rules to help do things, and related content.

The effects of this program on interpersonal behavior such as cooperation and sharing were complicated by the social class of the subjects. For the lower SES children in the sample, positive interpersonal behavior increased in the group that viewed Misterogers. This behavior did not change when lower SES children viewed neutral or aggressive programs. That fits our prediction nicely. The higher SES children, however, did not show this effect. Though the differences among television groups were small for higher SES subjects, the direction was the reverse of our prediction. Thus, we found positive effects of viewing Misterogers on interpersonal behavior for lower SES subjects only.

Experimental studies of imitation show many types of prosocial behavior that might be affected by appropriate television presentations. Observation of models is generally effective in increasing altruism (Bryan, Redfield, & Mader, 1971; Bryan & Schwartz, 1971; Grusec & Skubiski, 1970; Poulos & Liebert, 1972), helping (Staub, 1971) delay of gratification (Bandura & Mischel, 1965; Staub, 1972),

and setting high standards for self-reward (Bandura, Grusec, & Menlove, 1967; Liebert & Ora, 1968; Thelen & Frybear, 1971).

Moral judgments can also be altered in either a mature or immature direction through observation (Bandura & McDonald, 1963; Cowen, Langer, Heavenrich & Nathanson, 1969). These conclusions apply generally to elementary school age children; few studies have been conducted with younger children. These results cannot be applied directly to the effects of television programming, however. In most of the research on altruism, helping, and other prosocial behavior, the testing situation is similar or identical to the one in which the model was observed; the situation is a very artificial one; testing follows immediately after observing the model; and the model's behavior is simple, clear, and unambiguous. All of these factors probably increase the likelihood of imitation. We still need considerable research to determine in what ways television programs that do not have all these features can affect prosocial behavior in the real world of children's lives.

All of this evidence shows promise for the television medium to affect children's moral behavior in a positive direction. We are gathering more information on the impact of the Misterogers' Neighborhood program in our current research, but other programs need to be developed and studied. For instance, there is a need for more programs stressing prosocial themes that appeal to the elementary school age level. At the same time, the imitation studies need to be extended in ways that permit more generalization to television in a naturalistic context.

Commercial television as it currently exists presents moral content and values that are often contrary to the predominant values of the society. It emphasizes violence and illegal action; it perpetuates a system in which groups of people are devalued because of sex, race, age, and other such criteria. There is good reason to believe that this type of television content affects children's

moral behavior. It frequently leads to increased aggression; there is also reason to believe that it results in lowered self-control and greater likelihood of morally deviant behaviors. Nevertheless, television as it exists now is a large commercial enterprise that is not likely to change even with the extensive evidence that violence may be harming children. They might change if alternatives were presented to them. There is good reason to believe that many positive moral values and behaviors can be conveyed to children through television presentations. If such presentations draw audiences, they provide some alternative for commercial television producers. What we as researchers can do is to identify the components that help to make a program effective both in attracting children's interest and in producing some positive effects on their behavior.

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